

## A second specimen of Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini* from Texas, with a review of Meinertzhagen-generated confusion surrounding the first

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**SUMMARY.**—We document the first voucher specimen of Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini* from the upper Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico, salvaged on 25 August 2007 from Surfside Beach, Brazoria County. We also present evidence pointing to a case of fraud by Richard Meinertzhagen concerning the first Texas specimen of Sabine's Gull, taken on 4 October 1889 at Corpus Christi, Nueces County.

Herein we document the first voucher specimen of Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini* from the upper Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The female specimen (HMNS.VO 2055) from Surfside Beach (Brazoria County) is housed at the Houston Museum of Natural Science (HMNS), Vertebrate Ornithology (VO) division. It was salvaged by D. Simon on 25 August 2007, having apparently died of an undiagnosed illness, and was prepared as a study skin by T. McSweeney in July 2008 (Fig. 1). The non-breeding plumaged specimen weighed 203 g, had no trace of fat, an ovary 10 mm in diameter containing individual ovules 2.5 mm in diameter, and a wholly ossified skull.

Sabine's Gull was removed from the Texas review list at the Texas Bird Records Committee (TBRC) annual meeting in November 1999. Prior to that time there was only a single known specimen from the state (from Nueces County, lower Texas coast), along with 31 records documented with photographic evidence; however, none of these was from the upper Texas coast. Two records submitted to the TBRC but not accepted were from Galveston (1988) and Chambers (Peterson 1967) Counties. This second Sabine's Gull specimen therefore provides an important addition to our knowledge of the species' status in Texas. Moreover, this is the fourth species of pelagic bird to be documented as the first voucher specimen from the upper Texas coast from the HMNS VO collections; the first three were Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*, Band-rumped Storm Petrel *Oceanodroma castro* and Leach's Storm Petrel *O. leucorhoa* (Brooks & Arnold 2003).

The first Texas specimen of Sabine's Gull was an adult male taken on 4 October 1889 at Corpus Christi, Nueces County, by F. B. Armstrong, working on behalf of the English ornithologists F. D. Godman and O. Salvin. Godman and Salvin donated their enormous bird collection to the British Museum (Natural History, BMNH), and in 1891 their Texan Sabine's Gull was registered into the BMNH as specimen 1891.10.30.53 (as noted, with associated specimen data, contemporaneously in BMNH register AV42, p. 165) and its collection details subsequently published in Saunders (1896). However, no proper write-up of Armstrong's substantial southern Texas collection appeared (Griscom & Crosby 1925–26), and American ornithologists remained largely unaware of the existence of a Sabine's Gull specimen from the state; indeed, the first published American reference may not have been until Ridgway (1919: 664) noted a specimen from the 'coast of Texas (Corpus Christi, Oct.)'. Cottam *et al.* (1975: 135) later gave fuller data, correctly recording 'one adult male collected 4 October 1889 by F. B. Armstrong at Corpus Christi (Nueces County)', but knowledge of its whereabouts was clearly not widespread given that the second edition of the Texas checklist (TOS 1984) could only list it as 'specimen not located (shown in Oberholser 1974)'.

Subsequently, however, Rappole & Blacklock (1985) published the registration number 1965.M.4079 for the specimen, based on information provided by the BMNH.

The breeding plumage specimen 1965.M.4079 is indeed now the only Texan Sabine's Gull in the BMNH collection and has been since at least before the mid 1970s (see below). It was acquired by the BMNH in the 1950s with the huge Meinertzhagen collection and bears three labels: one, clearly the collector's label though lacking the name of the person involved, states in pencil on one side only 'C Christi, Texas, Oct 4-89, ?'; the second is the Meinertzhagen label with similar data, but with '(J. Dwight)' recorded on its reverse; the third is the BMNH label (Fig. 2). A bracketed name on the reverse of a label is the standard way Meinertzhagen indicated the institution or individual involved when he acquired a specimen by gift or exchange and, again typically, Dwight's name is also noted against the appropriate specimen entry in Meinertzhagen's own register (now also held by the BMNH). 'J. Dwight' refers to the well-known American ornithologist and gull expert Jonathan Dwight, who died in 1929 and whose large collection is now in the American Museum of Natural History, New York (Lanyon 1995).

There is thus a seeming paradox, with two BMNH specimens of Sabine's Gull, 1891.10.30.53 and 1965.M.4079, having the same date and Texas locality data but different collector and collection origins, and with seemingly only the latter now extant. The possibility of two separate Sabine's Gulls being collected on the same day, 4 October 1889, in Corpus Christi, but only one ever having been publicised, strains credulity. Moreover, the collector's label on the Meinertzhagen specimen is totally characteristic, in both style and handwriting, of those used by Armstrong on other specimens he obtained for Salvin and Godman, as was first noted over 30 years ago. On 21 July 1976, John Rappole wrote to the BMNH asking for information on an enclosed list of South Texan bird specimens, including Sabine's Gull, 'reputedly collected by Armstrong' for Salvin and Godman. In reply on 19 August 1976, the former curator, Derek Read, confirmed the presence only of the Meinertzhagen Sabine's Gull specimen 1965.M.4079, but noted 'However, a small label has the locality and date, without collector, written in pencil, and agrees in every way with the labels I have found on the other Armstrong specimens. I have assumed, therefore, that this is also one of his specimens.' (BMNH Library Archives, Tring) Independently of this, when re-curating the BMNH gull collection another former curator, Michael Walters, recorded that 'I am suspicious of this skin, Meinertzhagen seems to be only authority that Dwight was actually the collector' (notes dated 14 February 1986).

The style of preparation of 1965.M.4079 is characteristic of Armstrong, who produced beautiful, de-fatted skins, with the body cavity generously stuffed and carefully closed, wings and legs precisely aligned (latter crossed), and the beak normally pointing straight back so that the skull rests on the surface when the bird is laid on its back (six BMNH Armstrong skins of Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla*, Ring-billed Gull *L. delawarensis* and Bonaparte's Gull *L. philadelphia* examined). Even by Armstrong's high standards, however, and in comparison to all other BMNH *X. sabini*, the specimen's plumage is quite exceptionally clean (Fig. 3).

Since the first published accusation by Clancey (1984), it has become increasingly clear that Richard Meinertzhagen stole and relabelled numerous birds in his collection, with many being taken from the BMNH (e.g. Knox 1993, Rasmussen & Prŷs-Jones 2003). He prided himself on the high quality of his specimens and is known to have cleaned and or remade other important specimens he stole (e.g. see Rasmussen & Collar 1999, Kennerley & Prŷs-Jones 2006). It therefore seems almost certain that specimen 1965.M.4079 is in fact the missing 1891.10.30.53, but with the Salvin and Godman label replaced by a Meinertzhagen one that implies the latter obtained it from Dwight who, interestingly, did have a large col-

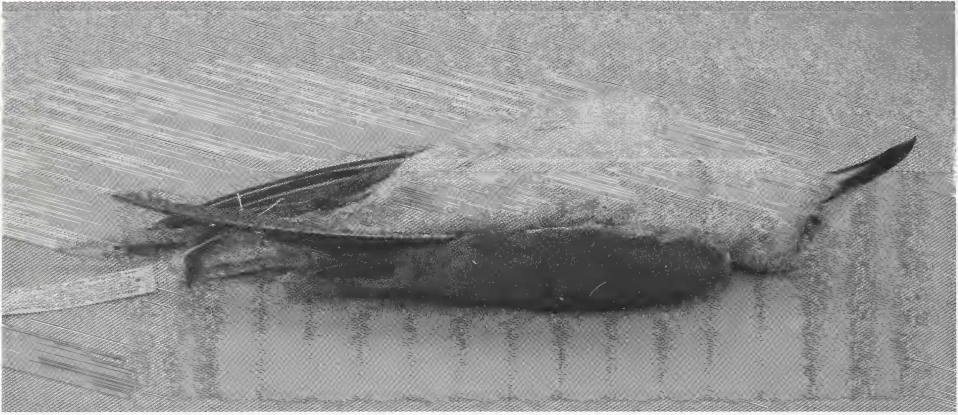


Figure 1 (above). First voucher specimen (HMNS.VO 2055) of a Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini* from the upper Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico, USA (Beth Copeland)

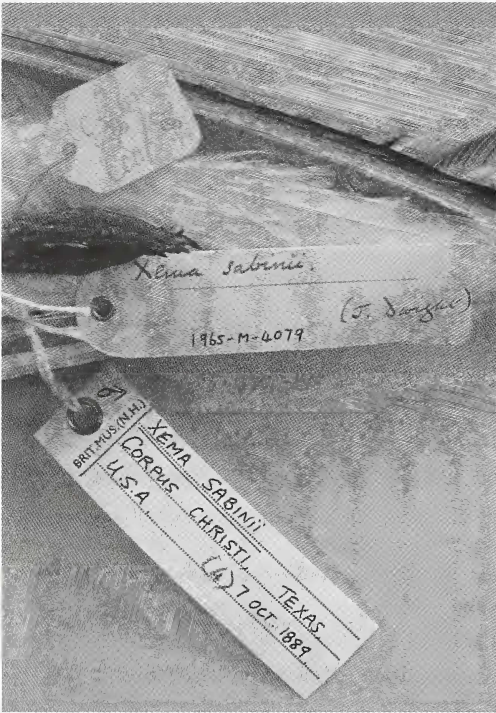
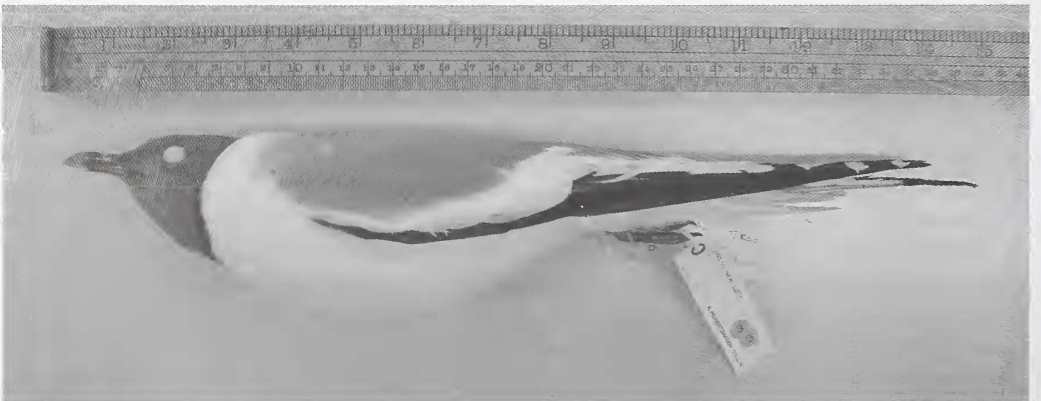


Figure 2 (left). Current labels of Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini* specimen BMNH 1965.M.4079 (actually BMNH 1891.10.30.53—see text) (© Natural History Museum)

Figure 3 (below). First voucher specimen (BMNH 1891.10.30.53) of a Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini* from the state of Texas, USA (© Natural History Museum)





lection of skins from southern Texas collected for him by A. P. Smith, but not until between 1908 and 1912 (Griscom & Crosby 1925–26). Despite the lack of a collector's name, it is nevertheless puzzling why Meinertzhagen retained the original collector's label and collection details in this instance although, as with some other important specimens he stole, e.g. the Forest Owlet *Athene blewitti* (Rasmussen & Collar 1999), Meinertzhagen appears never to have publicised that his collection contained this rarity.

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